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Searching for Oriental Simplicity: Foreign Brides and the Asian Family in Singapore

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Abstract

This article examines the oriental project of imagining migrant women through commercially arranged cross-border marriages. Taking the 'foreign bride' in Singapore as a subject of 'oriental simplicity', it shows how contemporary orientalism continues to shape practices and beliefs in something as familiar as searching for a wife and having a family. The article questions the gendered, classed and sexualised politics that render the migrant woman from less developed nations an ambivalent figure of desire, further complicating the already problematic articulation of womanhood and selfhood in the post-colonial state. By reinforcing a cultural marketability of 'oriental simplicity', commercially arranged cross-border marriages serve to naturalise patriarchal family structures and strengthen the hegemonic ideology of the Asian family.

Keywords

Foreign brides; orientalism, family, cross-border marriage, gender, Singapore

Introduction

Singapore's marriage landscape has significantly changed in the past two decades with the rise of cross-border marriages. In 1999, cross-border marriages involving Singaporean citizens marrying foreigners took up 16.1 percent of all marriages registered in that year (Singapore Department of Statistics 2012); by 2016 more than a third of citizen marriages featured transnational couples (Singapore Department of Statistics 2017). Over 70 percent of these marriages are between Singaporean men and 'non-citizen brides' from Asia, including China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Myanmar (Singapore Department of Statistics 2017). Mainstream media account for the 'foreign bride' phenomenon by citing Singaporean men's preference for 'simple women' as ideal, traditional housewives (Lianhe Wanbao 27 July 2010; Sim and Kok 25 July 2010). With more migrant women entering Singapore as potential brides, widespread public speculation and suspicion on their 'economic motivations' has also risen, reiterating a long-held assumption that these women are marrying for money and citizenship rather than love (e.g. Teo 27 August 2006; Lim 3 January 1999). Such stereotypical perceptions of cross-border marriages paint a rather contradictory image of the

foreign bride, who is preferred for her 'simplicity' as a wife with traditional values and at the same time vilified as a potential 'gold-digger' with ulterior motives of tearing families apart. Popular media representations continue to cast doubt on the fate of cross-border marriages, especially when age gaps between the bride and the groom, language barriers, cultural and socio-economic differences all seem to allude to marital incompatibility rather than harmony (e.g. Ee 21 June 2009).

Curious questions therefore remain. How is the foreign bride at once an ideal wife and a 'gold-digger', a person with reassuring simplicity and threatening complexity? Why is the foreign bride both desirable and loathsome, preferred for upholding traditional family values and accused of exposing the family to danger and potential ruin? Such contradictory images of the foreign bride, when juxtaposed, turn her into a shifting figure of ambivalence, evoking particular tropes of desire and fear reminiscent of orientalist fantasies predicated on an unequal understanding of Self and Other along racial, sexual and class lines. These paradoxical imaginations of the foreign bride recall familiar tales of the foreign, feminine Other, reinforcing gendered power relations in the intimate domains of marriage and family life. From the earlier 'mail-order bride' phenomenon to the increasing trend of global marriage migration 'in the name of love' (D'Aoust 2013), such tales rarely fail to place women who migrate for marriage under an orientalising gaze that sees them as both pleasing and problematic. Under this gaze, marriage migrants are treated as 'partial subjects' who strive to be 'almost the same' as citizens in the host countries, 'but not quite' (Bhabha 1984).

In this article, we turn to these questions and problematise the orientalising gaze at the heart of a persistent 'cultural logic of desire' (Constable 2003) in the changing dynamics of the transnational marriage market. Focusing on Singapore, we examine the orientalist project of imagining migrant women through commercially arranged cross-border marriages. When women migrate for marriage from less developed parts in Asia to Singapore–a state simultaneously defined by its colonial legacy, its faith in Asian exceptionalism, and its cosmopolitan hybridity– they become easy targets of an othering exercise that immediately subjects them to racialised and classed differentiations. Summoning up the typical image of a woman of the Orient created by patriarchal fantasy, the foreign bride evokes both predatory sexuality and timeless simplicity. This image, set in sharp contrast to Singaporean women as modern and independent subjects, legitimises Singapore's long celebrated sense of economic superiority and regional exceptionalism.

More specifically, we examine how cross-border marriages reinforce a cultural preference for 'oriental simplicity' that characterises migrant women from less developed nations, and show how this preference naturalises patriarchal family structures and strengthens the hegemonic ideology of the Asian family rooted in tradition. As migrant wives from less developed or rural places represent the simple and timeless womanhood from a past that is lost in Singapore, they embody the ideal wife in the patriarchal family who obeys the male head and devotes herself entirely to family life. This

idealisation shapes everyday desires and reproduces racialised differences, gendered stereotypes, and power relations that reflect broader geopolitical hierarchies of nation-states.

We first situate our analysis within the broader scholarship on marriage migration in Asia and draw on orientalism as a theoretical framework to tease out the intricate relations between bride popularity, gendered ideologies and the geopolitics of desire. This is followed by a discussion of Singapore's post-colonial context and orientalist unease with the increased influx of migrant women from China. After sketching our research methods, we show how shifting representations of women of different nationalities have an impact on their popularity and perceived suitability as 'good wives' over the past two decades. Such representations reflect a deep-seated sense of discomfort that drives the search for purer and more authentic 'oriental simplicity' in foreign women who could potentially become suitable wives for Singaporean men. Finally, we turn to the specific ways in which the foreign bride is deliberately 'matched' through market mechanisms to fit the ideological construction of womanhood in the Asian family, and how such matchmaking practices normalise and justify gendered and classed inequalities.

Cross-Border Marriages and Oriental Desires

As part of the burgeoning scholarship on marriage migration in East and Southeast Asia over the last three decades, studies have focused predominantly on women's experiences as migrant wives (Zhang, Lu, and Yeoh 2015), racialised and sexualised subjects (Lan 2008a) and agents of empowerment and potential social change (Bélanger and Tran 2011). The rise of marriage migration has taken place roughly at the same time as the global hiring of domestic workers, signalling that the transnational recruitment of women–as maids or wives–is shaped by the need for 'class-specific solutions to the alleged shortage of reproductive labour' (Lan 2008a, 834). Through the lens of 'intimate labour' (Boris and Parreñas 2010) or 'reproductive labour' (Kofman 2012), these studies demonstrate that female migrants are in demand across transnational 'marketplaces' (be it for marriage or labour), in order to plug perceived 'care deficits' and 'bride deficits' in various Asian destinations. Such analytical foci tend to draw attention specifically to the contemporary circulation of women's bodies and their labour as a modern phenomenon, which takes place alongside other circuits of globalisation, particularly with the expansion of capitalism into the intimate domains of family, care, and reproduction.

This contemporary focus highlighting inter-marriages as an effect of globalisation tends to overlook a cultural history of desire and intimacy that is inextricably intertwined with the region's profound colonial legacies. In Southeast Asian societies, inter-marriages across different regions, languages, ethnic or religious boundaries have been a common practice for centuries (Loos 2008; Rerceretnam 2012). Under British colonial rule, for example, the arrival of Chinese and South Asian

migrants in Southeast Asia resulted in various forms of conjugal arrangements from temporary marriages to long-term polygamous and monogamous unions. Ann Stoler (2002) has written eloquently on the gender-specific sanctions of sex and marriage that were of particular importance to imperial politics and colonial rule. European men's transient involvement with native women was deemed harmless, and even a symbol of white virility that affirmed a sense of European cultural dominance and racial superiority. Women's involvement with other men on the hand was taken to be dangerous, corruptive, and illicit. Colonial governments in Southeast Asia institutionalised marriage in order to consolidate its own legal and moral authority. From the onset, these marriage laws had 'additional gendered, racialised, and classed effects' (Loos 2008, 30).

These gendered and classed effects continue to be felt today when migrant women arrive as foreign brides, imbued with imagined fertility, heightened femininity, and ready availability. Such imaginations resonate with long-lasting stereotypes of migrant women as the cultural and sexualised Other embodying particular 'natural dispositions' and 'essential quality'. Writing on marriage migrants in Taiwan, Lan (2008a, 856) describes how migrant women are often 'viewed as fertile brides yet unfit mothers, in parallel with migrant domestics as loose women and unqualified wives'. Migrant existence thus serves to consolidate the moral validation of Taiwanese women as 'superior reproducers for the nation', who are invariably cast as 'educated wives and capable mothers' (Lan 2008a, 856). Foreign wives in Taiwan, regardless of their actual 'racial' (or national) identities as mainland Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipina or Indonesian, are packaged together as Taiwan's Other through an avid fetishization of migrant fertility and servitude. What is essentialised in this sustained imagination includes not only physical differences derived from phenotypical characteristics, but also particular claims to moral and status superiority of the group in power. In a similar vein, scholarship on marriage migration undertaken by mainland Chinese women to Singapore argue that precisely because they bear racial sameness to Singaporean Chinese, they are constructed as the sexualised Other who pose a great threat to the fabric of the Asian family (Yeoh and Huang 2010). When a foreign bride enters Singapore as a potential citizen subject and a mother to the next generation, she occupies an ambiguous position defined through discourses of 'social reproduction, social "problems" and social protection' (Yeoh, Chee, and Baey 2013). The figure of the foreign woman in Singapore is therefore highly contentious, eliciting mixed notions of desirability and aversion (Lu, Zhang, and Yeoh 2016). In the context of Indonesia, Fechter's (2016) work on the gendered experiences of Euro-American female professionals in Jakarta shows how cultural logics of desire are intimately entwined with notions of race and class across national borders. White female expatriates in Jakarta often find themselves in competition with Indonesian 'bargirls' and that Jakarta women's 'native beauty' could "undermine the sense of their own attractiveness' (Fechter 2016, 75). These studies remind us that Edward Said's (1978) powerful critique of orientalism continues to be salient in understanding the cultural and moral constructions of otherness and selfhood, and in questioning the

asymmetrical power structures that enable a regime of truth that perpetuates the imaginative divide between East and West.

In the post-colonial era, oriental desires filled with gender-specific politics continue to be played out through intense global interactions in various contact zones when international migration produces new forms of encounters and engagements in both public and domestic spheres. Lan (2008a) has described an 'interior frontier' where such politics are deeply embedded in the intimate spheres of marriage and domesticity within the national border. Nation-states like Singapore take matters of intimacy to heart and produce marriage and family policies that are implicitly gendered (Teo 2009) and classed (Heng and Devan 1992). Women as 'boundary markers' of national groups are directly implicated as the state regulates sexual and marital relations through women's bodies and practices (Lainez 2017; Lan 2008b).

Chinese Female Migration and Singapore's Orientalist Unease

To understand the ambiguous position of Chinese migrant wives in Singapore, we briefly pause to consider Singapore's history of race and gender politics during its heyday as a prosperous entrepôt under British colonial rule in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Such a past cannot be fully understood without recognizing the intricate connections between colonial governance, extensive migration of male coolies from China, and rampant brothel prostitution with women migrating from China and Japan to provide sexual services to the expanding labouring class of migrant coolies (Warren 2003). These prostitutes become representative of an array of troubling social problems of concern to both the colonial officials and the elite Straits Chinese in their political struggles for recognition, authority, and power. While Chinese male migrant labourers–mostly illiterate and single–embodied the colonial discourse of social danger and perfidy through their involvement in illicit trade, opium smoking, gambling and prostitution (Warren 2003b), rural migrant women who worked in the many brothels in and around Singapore's Chinatown were heavily stigmatised as "fallen women" whose bodies and practices needed to be constantly policed and "sanitised" (through public health campaigns) so as to safeguard Confucian and Victorian morality.

Such colonial stereotypes continue to find contemporary resonance with new arrivals of Chinese women as wives and labourers in post-colonial Singapore. Orientalist unease grew more evident when migrant women from China became a common sight in the small city-state in the 1990s. Called "China dolls" by the mainstream media, one Singaporean female reporter commented:

> Coming from a temperate climate, these women have clearer and smoother skin than their cousins from the tropics. If they are from the northern regions, they are likely to be taller, leggier and better endowed. Many of those who speak English do so with an attractive American lilt. Not only that, as a country that has opened up only recently, the women also

> have a reputation for being innocent and submissive, qualities most men like. Put simply, could it just be that I am intimidated by the new breed of women emerging from China? (Tan 6 October 1996)

This potent imagination of Chinese women as a racialised Other of fairer skin, speaking with a more sophisticated accent, and possessing a desirable submissive disposition, revealed a particular state of anxiety felt by local Singaporeans. As an ambivalent figure that is both enticing and threatening, the presence of the China woman escalated 'competition' between citizens and foreign wives over claims of femininity and ideal womanhood. In turn, it became strategic for citizens to imagine the foreign woman as either a dehumanised commodity that could be freely purchased on the matchmaking market (Chandy 18 April 2005), or as an innocent doll-like subject who was yet to evolve into a full-fledged, modern woman. By portraying migrant women from China as 'dolls', mainstream media reproduces an orientalist imagination that generates hegemonic knowledge of other women and 'Other Asians', who become the 'surrogate and underground self" (Said 1978, 3). Migrant women are constantly imagined in sharp contrast to local Singaporean woman, who are automatically modern and independent. The 'foreign bride' as Singapore's cultural and gendered Other also speaks directly to Singapore's modernity and respectability, reinstating its position of power and national superiority. Such problematic participation in contemporary orientalism depicts what Daniel Goh (2012) calls a (post-colonial) 'discomfort', where Singaporean subjects continue to hold on to a symbolic identification with the (imagined) West, while distancing themselves from the less modern and the less powerful so as to establish a position of dominance. At the same time, they seek an almost fetishised notion of 'oriental purity' to challenge colonial hybridity and inherent inferiority. In doing so, many strive to promote a selection of Asian uniqueness and exceptionalism that champions self-orientalising discourses to produce a counter-narrative of otherness and selfhood (e.g. Ong 1993).

As members of one of the 'dragon economies' in Asia, the Singapore citizenry share a strong sense of exceptionalism and entitlement (Thompson 2006). At the same time, given the inequalities generated by Singapore's globalisation project, its citizenry has experienced a fundamental split between the so-called cosmopolitan class and the humble 'heartlander' inhabitants (Yeoh 2004). The globe-trotting cosmopolitans are often seen as much desired talents embracing global lifestyles and aspirations, whereas the heartlanders are seen as harbingers of conservative, traditional norms whose presence helps to firmly anchor Singapore in Asian values (Yeoh 2004, 2435). Just as Singapore's cosmopolitan class today serves as an uncanny reminder of colonial elites in the nation's past, the 'heartlanders' represent those who are less able to keep up with rapid pace of change resulting from the nation's engagement with contemporary capitalism and globalisation.

Also excluded from the prevailing cosmopolitan narrative are low-waged migrant workers (Yeoh 2004, 2441). Singapore's immigration and labour policies channel migrant women into

different categories of control, generally along national-occupational lines. Women from China usually work in the factories, food courts and restaurants. Women from the Philippines and Indonesia take up jobs as domestic workers. Most of these women are given Work Permits, which restrict marriage to Singapore citizens by law. Hierarchical formations of classed and sexualised differences not only situate power and recognition in specific social relations, but reflect the systematic exclusion of migrant groups as an everyday normality. They extend Singapore's colonial legacies by conjoining global geopolitics to the seemingly intimate affairs of conjugal relations and family practices.

The Research Process

Our analysis is drawn from two years of ethnographic fieldwork (2010-2012) and in-depth interviews (each ranging from 60 to 120 minutes) with 14 commercial match-making agents and 33 Singaporean husbands who are involved in cross-border marriages. Migrant wives were also interviewed as part of the larger project on international marriages in Singapore and Malaysia but their narratives and practices have been analysed elsewhere (Yeoh, Chee & Dung 2013; Zhang, Lu & Yeoh 2015; Yeoh, Chee & Baey 2017) and therefore will not be reiterated in this article.[1]

The research team identified matchmaking agencies by scanning newspapers and searching for agency advertisements online and contacted commercial matchmakers by phone as well as by physically visiting their offices. This was also where we were introduced to a few couples and other matchmakers, who agreed to take part in this study. The research team members also met migrant wives from China and Vietnam at English classes organised by community organisations and were introduced to their husbands later on once trust and rapport were established.

These Singaporean husbands who are married to Chinese and Vietnamese women are in their mid-30s to late 50s and are on average about 10 years older than their wives (who range in age from early 20s to early 40s). The men represent the typical 'heartlander' citizens, who usually have up to secondary education. Most of their migrant wives have primary or secondary education with a minority having university degrees. In terms of employment, these men tend to be engaged in sales and services (e.g. taxi driver, electrician, storekeeper), followed by the construction industry, and some are self-employed (owner of hardware business, owner of hawker stall). Still others are in insecure work (e.g. odd-job labourer). Most of the women are unemployed and financially dependent on their husbands, although some are engaged in lower-end service jobs or are self-employed (e.g.

[1] It is worth pointing out that while foreign wives develop strategies and capacities to cope with patriarchal marital and family norms in Singapore, many do not find it particularly useful to reject or resist an orientalist construction of their images and suitability as wives and mothers. They are capable of reproducing social ideals of "Asian femininity"' and reconfiguring cultural meanings of being a 'good wife, filial daughter or dutiful sister' alongside an active pursuit of personal aspirations (Yeoh, Chee, and Baey 2013, 454).

beautician, manicurist, owner of a noodle stall, owner of a hair salon). A small minority are in higher-end service jobs such as real-estate agents. The majority of the interviews took place at respondents' homes, and a few at coffee shops and their workplaces (e.g. foot courts and shopping centres).

We also surveyed over 1,000 news articles (in both English and Chinese) and used these widely circulated reports to show how certain representations are made about foreign women in Singapore and what purpose these representations serve. We juxtapose popular discourses with voices of Singaporean men and women and point out the persistence of a discomfort embedded in the uneasy negotiation of tradition and modernity, and of gender and family in people's everyday lives.

Orientalising "China Brides"

In Singapore, the first waves of foreign women as brides arrived in the 1990s. The majority originally came from the southern regions in China. A 1996 news article reported that a graphic designer agreed to a matchmaking trip to Fujian province in southern China at his mother's request because:

> All good girls in Singapore have been snapped up … Those who are left are very career-minded and materialistic; they want the five Cs when I do not even have one C.[2] I wanted somebody simple and not materialistic, who is willing to stay at home and care for the family. (Straits Times 8 June 1996)

In the early 1990s, China was still in the early stages of economic reform, and the majority of Chinese nationals were imagined to be living in scarcity. The lack of material possessions turned Chinese women into ideal 'wife candidates' who were supposedly not career-minded, and willing to stay home and care for the family. Mainland Chinese women were also considered to possess fairer skin tones and taller figures, which endowed them with desirable feminine sensuality that was supposedly lacking in Singaporean women (Tan 6 October 1996).

[Figure 1 here]

Starting from the late 1990s, however, the popularity of women from China in the marriage market quickly disappeared as the 'passion for China brides cooled' (Straits Times 13 August 2000). At this time, Singapore relaxed restrictions on visitors from China, granting visas valid for up to 30 days. This new policy was aimed at attracting more tourists from China, and as a result more Chinese women could enter Singapore fairly easily and stay for a longer duration. In the 1990s, many had to go through matchmaking agencies before they could legally enter Singapore; since the 2000s, most of the Chinese women could come on their own terms as tourists or short-term visitors. This enhanced

[2] The "5 Cs" refer to cash, car, credit card, condominium and country club membership. Gaining popular currency from in the 1990s, the term speaks to the materialistic obsession of Singaporeans and their aspirations to acquire these things as markers of personal success in order to impress others.

mobility increased their public presence, which led to alarming discourses about them being 'everywhere' and making people 'uncomfortable' (Henson 3 July 2004).

Negative press of how Chinese women used marriage as a steppingstone to obtain money, property, permanent residency and citizenship dominated public view and led to growing concerns and suspicions. Singaporean families in particular developed a 'China bride phobia' (Tee 13 August 2000), portraying Chinese women as either promiscuous gold-diggers or materialistic schemers who wreck families. Concerns over Chinese women's presence dominated popular media: 'How did they get to come here? … Are they here to ensnare men? Do they just want citizenship? Will they abandon their Singapore families once they get what they want?' (Tan 6 October 1996). The persistent fantasisation of Chinese women being simplistic and obedient was mixed with an equally dominating imagination of their 'natural characteristics' as predatory, hyper-sexual, and immoral. News reports with sensational headlines such as 'Why those China girls worry me', 'China hookers are now in your neighbourhood', 'For money, they marry', 'China bride deserts man after 3 months' continued to bring back public memories of Chinese migrant women who worked as prostitutes in the sex trade in the nation's colonial past. Old memories and new tales came together to fuel a growing sense of unease among Singaporeans who had singled out Chinese women as one of the most identifiable Other in their midst. According to a news report:

> They (Chinese women) are seen as a threat, taking away jobs and Singaporean men. And they have an unfair advantage, since unlike Singapore women who have come to see themselves as the equal of men, they still stoop down to pamper the men. They are ruthless gold-diggers who marry the guileless Singaporean men for their money and a permanent residency status. Haven't you read the horror stories in the papers of these women divorcing their newly wed husbands and demanding a sky-high alimony? Worse, some of them are also wreckers of homes, like the *Beijing mei* (a young woman from Beijing) who snared a middle-aged Singapore man, and had the audacity to confront and beat up his poor Singapore wife, as was reported in the Chinese evening papers last week. (Lim 3 January 1999)

Such media representations of Chinese women indicated a wide-spread fear of desecration of boundaries and the possibility of contamination in Singapore's home-spaces. Chinese women were deliberately represented as the 'dangerous class' (McClintock 1995) that had to be disciplined and controlled so as to uphold the sanctity of the woman's modesty and the integrity of the family. When Chinese women 'fell from grace' and became the abject Other who no longer possessed the desired oriental simplicity, they had in fact moved one step closer to being like a 'modern Singaporean woman' who had always been caricatured as independent and materialistic. Yeoh and Huang (2010) point out that precisely because Chinese women are considered similar to Singaporean women, the need for boundary marking and maintenance becomes urgent as an effect of the 'sexualised politics of proximity'. As Chinese women depart from being 'simple women of tradition', they also lost claims on timeless purity. Along an imaginative spectrum of respectability, the place of the modern is

occupied by Singaporean women and the place of the traditional belongs to women from less developed countries (e.g. Vietnam and Cambodia). Chinese women are trapped in the middle as partial subjects who remain 'almost the same, but not quite'.

'Vietnam Brides'— 'More Simple and Plain'

By mid-2000s, Vietnamese women became the new face of the 'foreign bride' in Singapore. Over 30 matchmaking agencies in business at that time specialised in 'Vietnam brides' and a few also recruited brides from Cambodia.

[Figure 2 here]

Women from Vietnam and Cambodia gained popularity because they were generally 'more docile and less demanding than China brides' (Leong 19 February 2006). This view was largely shared by several Singaporean husbands who decided to marry Vietnamese women at that time. Mr Lam, a general contractor in his late 40s explained why he chose to marry a Vietnamese instead of a Chinese through the services of a match-making agency:

> Because they (the Chinese) would always ask for money to be sent back to their hometown, for building things. There are some… (hesitant), tsk, these China brides, money is very important to them, more important than their husbands. So when I saw this kind of situation, I became quite frightened. […] I feel that Vietnamese brides, they are more simple and plain. Because their living standards are lower, so their requirements are not so high. Most importantly, I feel, (in a) Vietnamese village, their husbands come first, they are treated very well (by their wives); secondly, (if the Vietnamese wives) send some money back home, to help their hometown build some houses, or buy a motorcycle for transportation, all these are understandable requests.

Mr Lam reiterated the popular fear that Chinese women were only after money, whereas the 'simple and plain' Vietnamese women put their husbands first, in accordance to village practices. Although he admitted that both Chinese and Vietnamese requested money to send to their natal families, only the Vietnamese request was deemed 'understandable' because Vietnamese women were seen as 'filial daughters' who cared for the family, whereas the Chinese only cared about money. Mr Lam emphasized Chinese greediness to brush aside the fact that he had difficulty meeting the financial demand. As Cheng *et al* (2014) observed, Singaporean husbands deliberately distance themselves from the common perception of 'failed masculinity' attached to men who seek to marry foreign wives, and at the same time reproduce dominant tropes of masculinity as the breadwinner and provider for the family. By praising Vietnamese women as 'simple and plain', and therefore easy to satisfy, Mr Lam is able to reinforce his masculinity and a position of authority. Explicit in this view is also the long-held patriarchal fantasy that the ideal wife should exemplify a kind of normative femininity rooted in tradition and characterised by filial piety. Implicit in Mr Lam's words is the

persistence of global geo-political inequalities between nation-states (in this case Singapore and Vietnam) that continue to reproduce and reinforce gendered hierarchies at home. As Chinese women became seen as a 'threat' who challenged such a fantasy and power relation within the family, docile bodies from the less developed parts of Asia assumed the place of new flagbearers of oriental simplicity tied to quintessential traditional values. Chinese women's marriage marketability depreciated as the oriental project shifted target to produce Vietnamese women as the new docile wife and devoted carer for the Asian family.

Another Singaporean husband Mr Chua, a masseur in his 50s, described the essential qualities that he sought when he decided to marry a Vietnamese. 'Most importantly,' he said, 'a wife must keep the household clean, buy some groceries in the market, come back home and cook, (so that we) can have a more lavish meal when the husband comes home.' The husband, he reasoned, should provide support, not simply in terms of family finances, but quite importantly in 'teaching' the wife about a modern lifestyle.

> Because, the husband, most importantly must understand (his) wife. Because she is after-all a Vietnamese married-off to Singapore and there are many things she is not adapted to. Many things she does not know how to use like the washing machine and so on. We must have the patience to teach her. We sometimes use words that are more difficult and she might not understand. We must teach her 'what is this', 'how to go', 'like this, like that', help her adapt to life in Singapore.

Mr Chua understood that his main responsibility as a husband is not only to provide for the family, but also to 'teach' his Vietnamese wife all about modern conveniences with patience and understanding. IN this way, Mr Chua could maintain his patriarchal authority without much challenge as the knowledgeable head of his family. His 'master-student' narrative suggested explicit power hierarchies between male and female, urban and rural, and modern and backward, as embedded in domestic relations. Such power hierarchies, not unlike those in colonial encounters when white masters tried to teach native pupils about modernity and civilization (Stoler 2002), are entwined to produce a framework of normativity where the citizen husband initiates his foreign bride into subservience and coaxes her into accepting the legitimacy of his own values as the master in the family. If the 'white masters' during the colonial conquest used gunpowder and cultural cajolement to establish muscle and moral authority; today, the Singaporean husbands use immigration identity papers (Jongwilaiwan and Thompson 2013) and washing machines to create a private sphere of domesticity and deference.

Starting from the late 2000s, yet another cycle of new 'oriental brides' arrived in Singapore when Vietnamese women also fell out of favour in the marriage market. The alluring aura of the 'Vietnam bride' as the family-oriented, simple woman who is innocent and compliant faded away as

negative press in popular media began to portray them as promiscuous creatures no different from the Chinese. Their presence in karaoke joints and entertainment establishments in Joo Chiat, Golden Mile Complex, and Orchard Towers was placed under media spotlight, sensationalising Vietnamese women's hyper-sexuality and feigned innocence (Ling 2010; Lainez 2017)

Most Singaporean husbands in our study continued to believe in their Vietnamese wives as simple and traditional; they nevertheless expressed concerns on the diminished control of their wives and the potential 'corruption' that their wives could be exposed to due to 'temptations out there' and the 'bad company' of other migrant women in Singapore. In 2010, Singapore's matchmaking market took a heavy hit as Vietnamese brides-to-be were no longer in high demand. There were several reasons for the decline of the matchmaking industry in Singapore, such as the global financial crisis that led to an economic slowdown, the tightening of regulations in Vietnam concerning women's marriage migration, and strong market competition among agents. Matchmakers also claimed that bad press about the Vietnamese as 'run-away brides' and their frequent remittances to natal families in Vietnam were reasons why Singaporeans became more cautious about Vietnamese matches (Phan 2011; Yeoh, Chee, and Baey 2017). Just like their Chinese predecessors, the Vietnamese were losing 'market value' because they were seen as failing to maintain ideal domesticity and 'oriental simplicity'. Matchmaking agents started to look at even poorer countries in the region, such as Myanmar and Cambodia, and tried to open up new markets by promoting women from these countries as the 'next best wives' (Chan 31 May 2009). There is little coincidence that this was also roughly the same time when domestic workers from Myanmar started to arrive in Singapore in the wake of a shortage of Filipino and Indonesian domestic workers in the employment market. Maids from Myanmar became popular because, as a maid agency manager explained: 'You can say they are a group of people who are very decent. They are not much influenced by the social media, less using handphones (sic), Facebook, YouTube. They just work, they are very hardworking' (Khoo and Ramesh 16 October 2013). The perceived decency of women from Myanmar in the domestic sphere, and their relative 'simplicity', continued to reflect and shape a persistent fantasy of the right kind of women who were suitable to provide care roles in the family.

Matching 'Foreign Brides' to the 'Asian Family'

From Chinese to Vietnamese, and then Cambodians and Myanmarese, the 'foreign bride' in Singapore remains a reified symbol of compliant womanhood that is both desired and detested in the commercialised marriage market. She is desired because tradition and Asian values continue to weigh heavily in Singaporeans' construction of the family, where women as the main caregivers are supposed to be the harbingers of conservative values through their gentleness, obedience and innocence. At the same time, she is detested because Singaporeans, women in particular, equate domesticated femininity to a lack of independence and individual agency, which Singaporeans believe

to be a position they have already long overcome, a position that belongs to the Other from the less developed and less enlightened parts of the world. The 'foreign bride' becomes a fantasy of both the ideal wife and the anachronistic Other, a figure innately contradictory and impossibly irreconcilable as Singaporeans struggle to construct meanings of tradition and modernity in the domains of gender and family.

Almost every Singaporean husband we talked to described women in Singapore as demanding, materialistic, career-minded, who harboured unrealistic expectations of marriage and family life. Some husbands criticised the hypocrisy that although Singaporean women despised patriarchy and gender inequality, they still wanted men to pay for their expenses and to carry their handbags. Others expressed concerns that the Singaporean wife would prioritise work over husband, children, and in-laws. There were also views that the Singaporean wife would be more difficult to control with her own income, which sometimes could be even higher than that of the husband's. These husbands' choice of a foreign wife, whose simplicity and domesticity were customarily imagined, would to a certain extent ease their masculinist anxieties (Cheng, Yeoh, and Zhang 2014). With migrant women contrasted as Singapore's Other, a woman's role as the filial wife and custodian of the family continued to be naturalised and legitimated. The gendered ideologies of the family exercised power upon the bodies of both citizen and foreign women, pitting them against each other in damaging ways. While Singaporean women were constantly put under scrutiny due to their 'failures' in preserving tradition and maternal femininity (Ramdas 2012), migrant women were judged by their 'cultural backwardness' and powerlessness by selling themselves for little money. Either way, it was the woman who always 'fell short' of the perfect womanhood, and it was her sole responsibility to live up to the patriarchal imagination of the ideal wife and mother. The sanctity of the family with its time-honoured traditional values remained sacred and unchallenged, worth being defended not only by men but also the state who assumed paternal authority over society that was likened to a family.

Teo Youyenn in her writing on the gendered family ideologies in Singapore points out the salience of culture and tradition—be it 'Asian or Chinese, Eastern or Confucian' (Teo 2009, 549)—in the ways in which Singaporeans understand family and nation. Although most Singaporeans cannot clearly articulate exactly what tradition they are holding on to, there is little doubt that they believe 'their practices are determined by a set of values that are primordial and hence stable, immutable, and in fact beyond their individual agency' (Teo 2009, 549). While Teo recognizes the state's effort in promoting particular versions of Asian values, which other scholars describe as a unique blend of Confucianism, anti-West neoconservatism, and self-orientalising exceptionalism, she stresses that people's valorisation of Asian values in their everyday contexts suggests major implications. This is where family and tradition are folded into one package, framed as 'unequivocally good and indeed

necessary, as primordial and real' (Teo 2009, 552), and where Singaporeans locate their natural places as men and women in society.

While Singaporean women face constant challenges conditioned by Asian family values as they juggle striving for careers and raising families, the 'foreign bride' is tasked to an exclusive mission of anchoring the family in tradition, caring for the old and the young, and following the husbands' commands. Not allowed to work or have a career when they are considered dependents of their Singaporean husbands as dictated by Singapore immigration laws, foreign wives have to 'rely on the legitimacy of the marriage relationship as well as the whims of their husbands in negotiating their rights vis-à-vis the Singapore state' (Yeoh, Chee, and Vu 2013, 139). If they fail to perform the role of an obedient wife whose sole purpose is to service the Singaporean family, they face very real possibilities of being sent home as 'returned goods', when they lose spousal sponsorship and subsequently the right to reside in Singapore. With the birth of children, the legitimacy of the foreign wife may be recognised by the state. Their reproductive contribution may then open up possibilities towards more rights such as medical benefits and permanent residency (Lan 2008b). In other words, the foreign wife is expected to demonstrate her familial piety and reproductive capability before she has the right to be recognised as a legitimate member of the family and the Singapore nation.[3] She belongs to a particular category of women whose feminine existence is made to match what is perceivably needed in the Singapore family and nation. Her 'oriental simplicity' is essential in consolidating her servitude in the family and her subordinate position in society.

Before their marriage in Singapore, most of the foreign wives recruited by Singapore's matchmaking agencies were required to go through various processes of screening which made sure that these bride-candidates were suitable for Singapore families. Because there were no specific legal regulations regarding the commercial matchmaking industry, these screening measures were likely invented by the professional matchmakers themselves following their own evaluations of what customers desired and common practices carried out elsewhere such as in Taiwan. These seemingly private practices were informed by very public family ideologies and cultural norms hinged on specific readings of tradition where the wife was selected based on her suitability to the husband and the husband's family, and not the other way around. One of the matchmaking agents Mr Lim who started his business in 2007 gave us a detailed explanation on how he selected potential wives from Vietnam for Singaporean men:

[3] The belief that giving birth to children would open up legitimate pathways to citizenship in Singapore is widely held by most of the foreign wives in our study, although such a view was not been officially affirmed. What is happening in Singapore when migrant women are legitimately married to Singapore citizens is very different from the grim reality in Constable's (2014) study when children are born out of marriage by migrant mothers, in which case having children present very little possibility to a permanent resident status for these mothers.

> I have several business associates in Vietnam, so I travel there several times a year. When I am there, I would select about 50 girls. Out of these 50, I first eliminate those who have dark skin, those who are too fat, too short, or those who have very low education qualifications. I usually eliminate these "low quality" girls in the first cut. Afterwards … I tell these girls, when you come to Singapore to get married and form a family, this is an important turning point in your life. But when you first arrive, your husband will not allow you to work, and the government will not allow you to work either. Can you accept that? I tell them that in Singapore, the husband usually gives the wife a monthly allowance for family expenses. I ask the remaining girls to raise their hands if they want $300 or $500 a month as an allowance. I then eliminate those who indeed raise their hands. The rest will be happy with $100 or $200 a month. Because in Vietnam, $100 is almost like their average monthly salary—in fact, sometimes their salary is only $70-$80 for an ordinary job. In other words, I help the Singapore family to eliminate those who have high expectations and high demands. I can then tell my clients later on that they don't have to worry about giving a lot of money to the wife—give her $200 a month if you find her satisfactory or if you have some extra cash; give her $100 a month if you don't. I have already set up this structure for them, so they won't fight over money in the future. Lastly, I tell the Vietnamese girls, in Singapore every man has to work, therefore she can't ask the husband to take her back to Vietnam for family visit after three months. They can ask to go home after 6 months or a year, but only with the husband's agreement and when he has leaves. The woman has no right to demand anything; this right belongs to the husband alone.

Mr Lim was very pleased with how he provided service to Singaporean families, in the sense that he had carefully screened potential brides based on their appearances and 'qualities'. He also educated migrant women about their proper place in Singapore and how they ought to behave after marriage. His coaching suggested the common criteria that Singaporeans used to determine whether a potential bride was of 'decent quality'. Several Singaporean husbands highlighted an appealing feminine quality of *guai*, implying a submissive and almost childlike disposition that could be loosely translated as soft, docile, and well-behaved. The ideal wife, to Singaporean men, was someone who cared and served, always on her best behaviour, and made minimal demand on others. For many, this ideal was best embodied by foreign women who were used to poverty (and therefore 'tradition') and remained 'plain and simple'. Migrant women were therefore produced and packaged as a deliberate match to male (or patriarchal) desires in Singapore. Along this line, social norms of cross-border marital compatibility and appropriateness were reproduced through and reinforced by specific oriental fantasies of the feminine and the powerless. The asymmetrical power relations within the family thus indicated the uneven geographies of power across borders. Such desires and fantasies consolidated the gendered, classed, and nationalised differences and inequalities by giving them cultural values, securing the imaginative divide between Singapore and the rest of Asia that are presumed as culturally and economically inferior.

Conclusion

In Singapore, the 'foreign bride' is othered and incorporated marginally and partially. She threatens to tear apart families, and at the same time she is the timeless woman who preserves traditional family values. As Said (1978) notes, these kinds of contradictory othering practices can be productive, in the sense that they engender totalising ideas and imaginations about an object that is often mute, powerless, and passive. These othering practices are most notable in colonial encounters when European subjects travelled to foreign places as part of their masculinist voyages. Today, the foreign has travelled back into the home territory and produced variegated 'interior frontiers' (Lan 2008a) where new formations of gendered, classed, ethnicised boundaries complicate the already problematic articulations of self and other. While marking alterity has always been practiced across time, space, and throughout histories, the particular form we see today shows contemporary ramifications.

In this article, we take the 'foreign bride' in Singapore as a subject of 'oriental simplicity' and question the gendered, classed and sexualised politics that render her as submissive yet predatory, traditional and powerless. We argue that the production of the 'foreign bride' in Singapore shows a new form of participation in contemporary Orientalism where the modern patriarchal subjects, both male and female, construct legitimacy claims about the subordinate feminine Other who is subsumed into the Singapore family because of her imagined simplicity, traditionality, cultural and economic inferiority. Marriage and family become intimate domains into which Orientalist ideologies have dissolved and validated by market mechanisms, state policies and individual desires. The 'foreign bride' remains a figure of naiveté, submissiveness, and primordial promiscuity as such imaginations of an internal Other are accepted as normal and rarely checked. Against these imaginations, Singaporeans are seen as modern, independent and respectable. At the same time, the 'foreign bride' is tasked to bring tradition, exemplified by passive femininity, reproductive willingness, and domesticity, back into the family, which helps to give stable meanings back to a fast-changing society

In post-colonial Singapore, orientalist fantasies of the cross-border Other are rendered both apolitical and legitimate. The project of orientalising migrant women serves two main purposes. One, it generates a chain of signification that associates the foreign (specifically the Other Asian) to female, and from their submissive simplicity to backwardness. As Louisa Schein (1997) notes in her writing on minority women in China who become the objects of 'internal orientalism', the chain of signification that links ethnic to female to rural to backward serves to encourage a derogated, subordinate positioning of monitories, women and peasants in Chinese society. In a similar vein, such signification also serves to validate Singapore's position of economic superiority and to confirm the subordinate position of women and less developed Asia. Two, and perhaps less explicitly, it continues to place focus and pressure on women to preserve and protect Asian family values. Women, citizen or foreign, become contested subjects through whom tradition is domesticated and reproduced. Scholars have pointed out the ways in which Singaporean women also participate in orientalising foreign

brides to defend a sense of respectability and their entitlement as modern subjects (Ang 2016). Singaporean men turn marriage and family life into sites of civilising missions where they educate 'foreign brides' about modern living and at the same time protect them against possible temptation and corruption from the outside world. By imagining and constructing foreign women through an orientalist gaze, a regime of differentiation that separates the Singaporean self and foreign other can be reproduced, which helps to naturalise hegemonic ideological structures such as Asian traditions or the Asian family. Singapore's contemporary participation in orientalism is rooted in a deep discomfort of dislocation between modernity and tradition. This discomfort finds new articulations of subjectivity and control through gender, marriage and family, where hierarchies of power are marked along nationalities, identities, and class.

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